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☆HOLY☆NIGHT☆

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Martinez Sierra

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No. 293 DEMCO-MADISON-WIS

HOLY NIGHT

HOLY NIGHT

A MIRACLE PLAY
IN THREE SCENES

BY
GREGORIO MARTÍNEZ SIERRA

ENGLISH VERSION BY
PHILIP HEREFORD

WITH WOOD-ENGRAVINGS BY
GABRIEL PIPPET

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

GREGORIO MARTÍNEZ SIERRA, playwright, novelist, essayist, publisher, theatrical producer, etc., was born in 1881. "Navidad" was first performed in Madrid at the "Eslava," the author's own theatre, with music by Joaquín Turina and with the exquisite Catalina Barcena as the Madonna. The motif of the play is inspired with that sympathy for the oppressed, the desolate, the outcast, which illumines so much of Martínez Sierra's work, and in "Holy Night" finds such passionate expression. It is also characteristic of the author's spirit that he did not shrink from giving his lovely conception a wholly modern setting. Thus, he seems to say, did the miracle happen in the bustle and turmoil of the life of to-day, thus might it happen at any time, if so it were willed. And we come away believing him.

At places in the Spanish text the stage directions indicate that music is heard. In this English version words appropriate to the situations have been inserted. These are in Latin, the neutral language of the Church, when they are to be sung by angels, otherwise old English carols have been drawn upon. Although the term Holy Night is not in everyday use in England for the night which links the feast of Christmas to its Vigil, it is so universally used in Western Europe, witness *Heilige Nacht*, *Nochebuena*, etc., that no apology is needed for making it the English title of a play in which the action takes place during that night.

P. H.

APPEARING IN THE PLAY

The Virgin
Saint Francis of Assisi
The Priest
The Archangel Michael
The Archangel Raphael
The Archangel Gabriel
Five Angels
Bernarda
Seña Ubalda
Madalena
Bautista
Señor Simón
The Sacristan
Nicasia
The Labourer
The Beggar
The Ragamuffin
The Mother
The Boy

with

Priests
Acolytes
Friars
Women
Workmen
Beggars

THE FIRST SCENE

COME TO ME, ALL YOU THAT LABOUR, AND ARE BURDENED, AND I WILL REFRESH YOU.

THE INTERIOR of a Gothic Cathedral on Holy Night; the Adoration of the Child, following Midnight Mass, is just ended, and the faithful have begun to leave the church by a side door. At the back the High Altar, resplendent with countless candles, glows through the haze of the incense which clouds the church.

The choir is heard singing the old carol :—

There is no rose of such virtue
As is the rose that bare Jesu.
Alleluia.

For in this rose contained was
Heaven and earth in little space,
Res miranda.

By that same rose we may well see
There be one God in Persons Three,
Pares forma.

The angels sungen the shepherds to,
Gloria in excelsis Deo.
Gaudeamus!

Leave we all this worldly mirth,
And follow we this joyful birth,
Transeamus.

The music to which it is set is joyful and pastoral; the singing continues till after the Celebrant and his attendants have left. As the curtain rises the Celebrant, vested in white and gold, is seen carrying the Child back to the altar, over which there is a group of statuary depicting the Nativity or the Adoration: the Virgin, on her knees, or seated on her humble throne at Bethlehem, encircled by angels. The Celebrant with his attendants, deacon, sub-deacon, acolites with candles, thurifers, etc., then disappears into the sacristy. The faithful all leave the church. The last to go are a gentlewoman and her child, a little lad. She is in a

hurry to get out and takes him by the hand; but he moves slowly, as if something were holding him back, with his head turned and his eyes fixed on the altar where the Virgin is.

THE MOTHER (*impatiently*): Come, child, come. . . . Quick! it's late. What are you looking at?

THE BOY: I am looking at Our Lady.

THE MOTHER: But you have seen Her; come!

THE BOY: I don't want to go.

THE MOTHER (*not understanding*): Why not?

THE BOY (*distressed*): Because it's Holy Night, and Our Lady has to stay all by Herself.

THE MOTHER: But, child. . . .

THE BOY: And She is sad. . . . I know. . . . I don't, I don't, I don't want Her to stay in the church alone; they will lock it up . . . and She will be cold . . . and the Child too! . . . Look at Her. Look at her. Don't you see that She is sad?

THE MOTHER: What's the matter with you is that you are dead for sleep, and don't know what you are saying. . . . Come! Cover yourself up well, it's snowing. . . . (*Wraps a muffler round him.*)

THE BOY: I don't want to go! Dear Lady, Blessed Virgin, I want to stay with You; I don't want to go. (*Weeping.*)

THE MOTHER: Come, come! We shall catch our deaths of cold.

She takes the boy by the arm and drags him to the door. They leave the church, but to the last the

boy's head is turned towards the Virgin and his eyes are fixed on Her.

Two acolytes enter with extinguishers and put out the candles on the altar. The solitary lamp in the Sanctuary remains burning. A mysterious, miraculous light spreads over the church. It is the light of a bright winter moon, which, entering by the coloured glass of the windows and broken by the smoke of the incense, iridesces in a shimmer of mother-of-pearl and silver.

A choir as of angels is heard singing:—

Venite ad me omnes qui laboratis,
Et onerati estis,
Et ego reficiam vos.

The music is not pastoral now, but celestial; it combines the serene peace of an assured beatitude and a strange note of expectancy, the anxious foreboding of the miracle which is to happen and is now blossoming in the hearts of the Mother and Child. It is an awakening, a dawning, a promise, and at the same time an affirmation: a miracle in fact.

The smoke of the incense clears away. The statues over the altar at the back come to life; the Virgin, the Angels, become real beings in human flesh.

The Virgin rises, takes in her arms the Child, which the priest has left on the altar, and holds Him up for a moment to the adoration of the angels, who stand round Them in ecstasy and wonderment. A song of the Nativity is heard, which seems to be sung by angels

to the seraphic music of celestial strings, and the words of their song are:—

> Hodie Christus natus est; hodie
> Salvator apparuit; hodie in terra
> Canunt Angeli, laetantur Archangeli;
> hodie exsultant justi, dicentes:
> Gloria in excelsis Deo, Alleluia.

The music is quite distinct in character from the carol at the beginning, as if it were composed by the subtle wisdom of the Cherubim and played with the fiery inspiration of the Seraphim; for of course the Cherubim are Wisdom, and the Seraphim Love. Almost immediately the Virgin, bearing the Child in her arms, walks very slowly down into the nave, as if lost in deep meditation. The angels follow reverently at a little distance, gazing at Her in rapt adoration. In silence they exchange looks, seeming to ask one another with artless emotion: "What is this wonder?" "Whither are we going?"

Saintly beings appear from both sides of the nave, coming evidently from side altars, which, however, are not seen: the three Archangels, St. Michael in magnificent armour, lance in hand, a proud figure of a youthful warrior; St. Raphael in wayfarer's dress, holding his fish of silver; St. Gabriel, the Angel of the Annunciation, with his spray of white lilies; St. Francis of Assisi in his poor friar's habit, carrying a bunch of the miraculous roses of the Portiuncula. They come towards the Virgin, but without approaching too close, and gaze at

Her in wondering adoration, foreboding the miracle which they cannot yet understand.

The silence in the church intensifies. So still is it that one can almost hear the beating of their hearts. The lamp in the Sanctuary gleams like a star in an African night.

The silence is broken by the mediæval chimes of the clock in the tower, which reach the interior of the church somewhat muffled by the wind which is blowing outside. It is half-past twelve, so that the toccatas for the quarters are heard followed by the twelve strokes for the hours. While the clock is striking all the figures remain motionless. The Virgin listens as if the sound of the chimes were a call from the world without, a cry of suffering humanity outside the church pleading for pity. She listens, and makes up her mind as the clock ceases to strike, leaving a prolonged, resonant echo in the large, silent nave. She makes a gesture of assent, as if answering the intercession which her own heart is making for the unfortunate and the desolate, and then with a firm step moves towards the door by which the faithful have lately left.

The three Archangels come forward respectfully and place themselves in front of the door, wishing to bar her passage. Gently but majestically She motions them away. The Archangel Raphael bows low before Her and shows by expressive signs that without, in the street, it is bitter cold. Our Lady smiles as if to say " 'tis no matter," and takes a step forward.

St. Raphael lifts the heavy tapestry which closes the opening; the icy wind from outside enters in a violent gust, and ruffles and disorders the Virgin's veil and the long golden hair of the angels. The angels shiver with cold. . . . They try to dissuade Our Lady, and one of them, the littlest, actually takes hold of her robe to draw Her back to the altar; but She continues to smile, her purpose unshaken. She gives the Child to one of the angels, who covers Him in his robe, and wrapping her own about Her, She goes on her way with a gracious gesture of command to St. Raphael, who again lifts the tapestry which he has let fall.

The celestial escort accepts the inevitable and a start is made. In front St. Michael, the strong man of God, knight-errant of the errant Lady; next the angel with the Child in his arms close wrapped in his mantle; at his side St. Gabriel watching over the Child; Our Lady follows, preceded with infinite respect by St. Francis, who is the only one to understand and to rejoice at the miracle, and surrounded by her body-guard of angels: little people, who are perplexed and openly curious, at bottom delighted by this mysterious excursion, now that they see that there is no escape from it. The littlest of them, he who before had tugged at Our Lady's robe to stay her going, even turns to wave a mocking farewell to some saints who had not been summoned to play a part in the miracle, and therefore had to remain at their altars in their age-long immobility of "images", fashioned of stone, without life. The spirit of the angel

escort is, in fact, one of open pride in the nocturnal adventure, in the mystery of which they feel themselves to be in a sense associated.

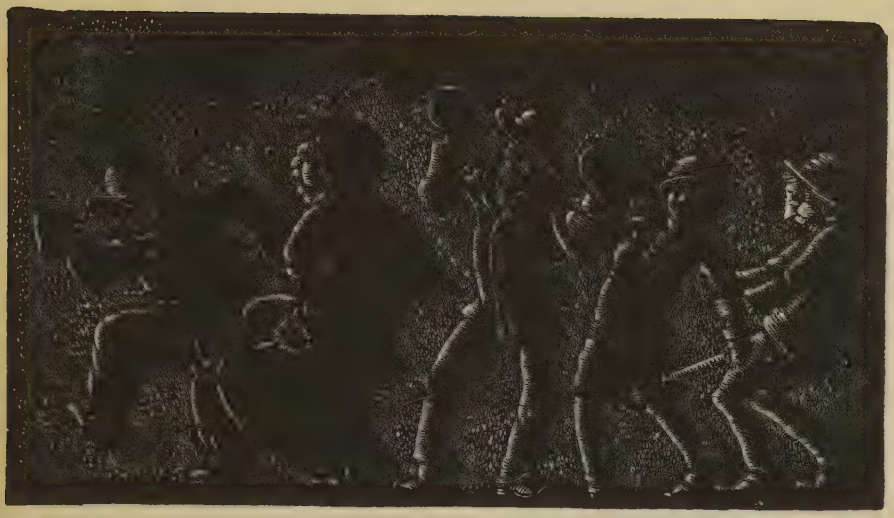
The church remains empty. The air is stirred by a deep, ineffable sigh.

An old sacristan comes out with his huge, clanking bunch of keys. He traverses the nave, passes in front of the high altar, makes an inspection of the whole church . . . and observes nothing. He stops in the middle of the nave and picks up from the floor one of the roses of the Portiuncula which St. Francis had let fall. . . . It is a marvellous rose, of wondrous beauty, fragrant, palpitating like a heart, glowing with the fire of charity, glittering with dew —tears of the penitent transmuted to diamonds. He looks at it . . . but understands nothing, and shrugging his shoulders, without seeking to discover whence it came, he goes his way on his round of inspection, clanking his keys.

The littlest of the angels puts his head through the

folds of the tapestry and laughs at the sacristan, rapping his head with his knuckles to indicate that the sacristan is utterly incapable of understanding or even of suspecting what is afoot; then he disappears.

Through the opening in the tapestry the night wind has again found entry; the sacristan feels the cold, he shivers . . . he sneezes . . . with an ill-humoured grimace he goes to the door; he lifts the tapestry, but no one is there; he carefully locks the door, and crossing the nave makes his way out into the sacristy.



THE SECOND SCENE

A DROP SCENE. A very narrow street on which opens one of the doors of the Cathedral.

It is now snowing hard and it is very dark, for the moon is completely hidden by the clouds. Still darker, in the blackness of the night, are the silhouettes of the gargoyles and the outlines of some miserable houses. Above, the harsh creaking of a weathervane as it sways in the wind. It is the moment when the Virgin and her escort are coming out of the Cathedral.

From the opposite side there comes a drunken crowd

of men, women, and children, ragged, of the poorest. One can hardly see them in the darkness. They are carrying tin plates, rolling pins, brass pots, and are making a horrid din, celebrating Holy Night after their manner. The raucous voice of a man is heard from out of the disorderly rabble singing :—

Oh, to-night is Holy Night!
To-morrow's Christmas Day.
Pass the jug and lets be merry
And drink all care away.

For joy and bliss
they shall not miss,
that make good cheer
this Holy Night.

All laugh and make a great noise with their barbarous instruments to mark the burthen of the song.

The celestial company now appears; but though a faint bluish light plays over it, the drunken rioters do not notice its presence, and make as if they were going to trample on Our Lady, who holds out her hands as if to ward them off, while the angels and saints close their ranks intent on guarding the Mother and Child.

The rioters pass and disappear, but one of their number has fallen to the ground: a little boy, half intoxicated, half asleep. He tries to get up to follow the others, with whom doubtless his mother is, but slips on the snow, again falls heavily, and stays stretched on the ground. Our Lady's following come forward. An angel stumbles over the boy. All stoop to look at

him. The little chap lifts his head, gets half up, and rubs his eyes which are dazzled by the blue light which illumines the group. Our Lady bends down a little and stretches out her hands to him. The boy, fascinated, looks first at Her, then at the Child, who is asleep in the arms of the angel. Our Lady stands with arms extended, smiling. . . . The little chap raises himself as if under an enchantment, first on to his knees, then on to his feet, stretching out his hands towards those of Our Lady, but without touching Her.

There is a vivid flash, then a moment of utter darkness.

THE THIRD SCENE

An open space on the outskirts of a large, modern, ultra-civilised city.

In the foreground a high road (it is supposed that the proscenium divides it down the middle), and one of the rows of trees which border it forms a screen to the rest of the scene. Since it is winter the trees are bare skeletons with their branches covered by frozen snow. But on the left there rises a pine tree which has kept its green, and the glistening frosted snow which lies in its foliage gives it the appearance of a Christmas tree.

Behind this poor screen of trees stretch the tracks of a railway, which, since the town is near, form a complicated network of intercrossing lines. At the back the outline of the town, some little distance away, its lights twinkling intermittently, and over it the ruddy

glow with which the intense illumination of the city tinges the dull wintry sky.

It has stopped snowing and the moon has come out. The shadows of the trees in the foreground are thrown sharply on the ground which is covered with snow.

The wind has fallen, and the air is still as crystal. From time to time flakes of snow slip from the branches of the trees and fall slowly to the ground. The cold, velvety silence of the snow reigns over the land. The scene is empty for a moment, and for a moment the music is mute to allow this muffled, velvety silence to be felt, then thrills with the foreboding of the miracle, for the Mother and Child with their attendant angels are drawing near. . . .

> Ecce advenit dominator Dominus,
> Et regnum in manu ejus, et
> potestas et imperium.

They enter, their robes, their wings, their golden hair flecked with snow, which sparkles in the light of the moon.

The company is as before, but now increased by the presence of Bautista, the little boy whom they picked up in the street. He knows the ground better than the celestial beings. These cold, desolate, inhospitable outskirts of the great city are his home and his kingdom, and with boyish pride he acts as guide to the divine company, which is a little lost on this earth—so cold! He walks near Our Lady, and it is to Her that he

addresses himself whenever he talks; for he has perceived that She is a "personage," and the most important member of the group; so he seeks to establish between Her and his tiny, ragged self a camaraderie, to which he thinks his office of cicerone gives him the right.

When the dialogue begins the music ceases.

BAUTISTA (*coming on a bit ahead of the others, and pointing the way*): This way, Lady. (*The Virgin and her following appear but stop for an instant.*) Take care! Don't fall in crossing the ditch; the snow is terribly slippery. (*In a very grown-up tone*) See how badly the town council keeps the suburbs! (*Offering Our Lady his hand*) Would you like to give me your hand when You jump? (*offers his hand, but St. Michael gently pushes him aside and bows low, letting the Virgin and her following pass. They come forward a few steps. Bautista looks at his hand in comic distress, gathering that he is not worthy to give aid to so noble a Lady.*) It isn't very clean . . . but! (*he cleans his hand, rubbing it on his blouse. . . . Suddenly there falls on him an extraordinary sense of awe. . . . He wants to speak, but dares not. . . . At last he addresses St. Francis, who in his friar's habit presents a somewhat more familiar figure, and says to him, pulling at his sleeve*) I say! Are you going on a journey?

SAINT FRANCIS (*laying his hand affectionately on the little chap's head*): Our Lady has left her home to-night in search of those who have not remembered her Son.

BAUTISTA (*puzzled*): Of those who have not remembered her Son? But who haven't remembered? And why should they remember? (*thinking he understands, thanks to some vague reminiscences of the cinema*) Oh! . . . I see . . . yes . . . they'll be some rich relations She has. Isn't that it?

SAINT FRANCIS (*smiling*): No. To-night Our Lady seeks her lost children; those who cannot and those who know not how to draw near Her, for no one has shown them the way.

BAUTISTA (*innocently*): The way? Where to?

SAINT FRANCIS: To her heart.

BAUTISTA (*looks at the friar, wanting to understand, wanting to question him, like an anxious child who is trying to guess, who fears to ask; he hesitates; at last he plucks up courage*) I say . . . (*looking towards the Virgin*) and She . . . is She rich or poor?

SAINT FRANCIS (*in pained astonishment*): But . . . Do you not know Her?

BAUTISTA (*simply*): Me? No, Sir. It's the first time I've seen Her. She has never been in this part of the town before.

While Bautista and the friar have been talking on one side, the angels have collected some stones and piled them up under the green pine tree, fashioning a rustic throne on which Our Lady seats herself, taking into her arms the Child, whom the angel who has been carrying Him offers on his knees.

BAUTISTA (*who all the time that he has been talking to St. Francis has never taken his eyes off Our Lady, rushes towards her*): Lady! You're not going to sit out here, in the open, on such a night? You'll freeze, Lady! (*Our Lady smiles*) Indeed you will. (*With a superior air and the compassion of a very grown-up person addressing a child*) Are you tired? (*thinking hard*) The fact is there's a pub over there. (*Scratching his head*) But the fact is there are bad people about . . . and what terribly elegant people you are! . . . and to-night they'll be on a beano. (*There is heard in the distance the sound of merry-making in a tavern, and even the echo, scarce perceptible, of the voice of the drunken man, who again is singing "To-night is Holy Night."*) I say, you can hear the row they're making from here. That comes from the pub across the bridge. (*He looks round as if asking "what are we to do?"*) Wait! (*Suddenly, as if he has found a solution, he addresses the littlest of the angels, who, doubtless because he is so tiny, inspires him with greater confidence.*) You come with me. (*To Our Lady*) We are going to a cottage round the corner, on the chance the people have gone to get a drink, and we may be able to pinch a strip of old matting or a bundle of straw for You to put your feet on. (*He starts off precipitately, taking with him the littlest angel, whom he seizes by the tunic.*) It's close by; we shan't be long. (*He is going off with the angel when he stumbles over a bulky object lying in the shadow under the trees, close to the ditch. It is a shapeless mass of rags, paper, scraps of matting. Bautista*

nearly falls.) Damn! Who's put this here? (*The heap stirs; the rags and paper fall apart, and from the midst of the filth emerges Bernarda. On seeing the heap move Bautista recoils startled, but he is ashamed of his fear and turning to the angel says with an air*) Don't be frightened!

BERNARDA (*emerging from the heap, still half asleep*): Eh? . . . What? . . . Who ? . . .

BAUTISTA (*recognising Bernarda*): Why!! If it isn't Bernarda! . . . Bernarda, wake up!

BERNARDA: Oh! . . . it's you. (*Crossly*) You might look where you are going; you've about done for my foot.

BAUTISTA: Get up, woman!

BERNARDA (*with a start of fear*): What? Are the police coming?

BAUTISTA: No. (*Bernarda makes as if to tuck herself in again*) Get up! A Lady is here, terribly elegant, terribly swell.

BERNARDA (*incredulous*): A lady?

BAUTISTA (*with passionate insistence*): Yes. She is trying to find some relations She says She has; but She does not know where they are. She wants them to take notice of her Son.

BERNARDA: Get along. . . . You're talking through your hat. . . . Let me alone!

She tries to go to sleep again.

BAUTISTA (*excitedly*): But it's true. (*To the angel*) Isn't it true? (*To Bernarda*) Don't be rude. Wake up!

Look at Her. (*He drags Bernarda out by the arm and makes her look towards the place where the Virgin is seated.*)

BERNARDA (*looks with an ill grace, but on seeing Our Lady cries out*): Aa . . . h! (*Trembling, leaning on her hands, gazing as if hypnotized*) It is She! It is She! (*Gets up like a flash, darts across the scene, and collapses at Our Lady's feet. She stays crouched on the ground, her face buried in her hands. Bautista looks on with amazement and rather enviously, as if to say "she's going to Her" . . . "she knows Her" . . . "Where can she have seen Her?" Two angels bend down and raise Bernarda from the ground. She stays on her knees, contemplating the Mother and Child with an expression of ecstatic felicity, and stammers breathless*) Lady! . . . Lady! . . . It is Thou! . . . (*Passionately, almost sobbing*) It is She, Bautista. (*Seizes Bautista's hand and drags him to her by main force, but without ever taking her eyes off Our Lady*) Kneel! . . . It is She!

BAUTISTA (*kneeling beside Bernarda, hypnotized but not understanding*): She? . . . Who?

BERNARDA (*passionately*): She! Her very self! Look! Look! (*She tears from out of the rags which cover her bosom a miniature in a medallion, a reproduction of Botticelli's Madonna of the Magnificat and anxiously, rapturously, compares it with the celestial group before her.*) Her very self! (*Adoringly*) The Blessed Virgin. (*With rapture*) Yes . . . it is She! She with the golden hair,

the blue robe . . . and the Child! . . . and the angels! The Blessed Virgin! She who is in the church, She who is in heaven. (*Coming nearer on her knees as if under a spell*) It is the same! (*Turning to Bautista*) Isn't it true, Bautista? Look!

BAUTISTA (*envious and a little put out*): Who gave you that picture?

BERNARDA (*blushing*): No one gave it me; I found it in the ashbin at the Countess's house.

BAUTISTA (*maliciously*): Didn't you return it? And you call yourself an honest rag-picker!

BERNARDA (*passionately to the Virgin*): I am honest, Lady, I am! (*Making crosses in the air*) I swear by these! I never kept a thing . . . not so much. . . . I have always returned everything I found . . . and I have found silver spoons dozens of times . . . and one day a pearl as big as that . . . and another time a gold ring with a blue stone! Yes, Lady, I may be a rag-picker, but I am decent.

BAUTISTA (*with insistence*): Yes, but that? . . . (*points to the medallion.*)

BERNARDA (*triumphantly, lovingly, but a little sadly*): This? No, Lady! This no! (*Blushing*) I brought it here . . . without anyone seeing it . . . nearly two years ago . . . and I have wanted to take it back a hundred times. (*With great sincerity*) Yes, Lady. (*Meekly*) I could not! (*Lovingly*) Every time I looked at it, (*gazing rapturously at the medallion*) the Child looked at me and seemed to say: "Bernarda, don't take me yet . . . leave

it till to-morrow, for I want to stay with you one day more." (*Humbly*) But now I will take it, if You tell me to. . . . (*her eyes fill with tears of joy*) for now I have seen both of You!

She gazes at the Mother and Child, in an ecstasy, smiling, her eyes brimming with silent tears, her hands tight clenched.

BAUTISTA (*looks at Bernarda, looks at the Mother and Child, trying hard to understand. . . . At last he gets up very slowly and goes over to St. Francis.*) I say, is it true what she says?

SAINT FRANCIS (*smiling*): Yes, my son. . . .

BAUTISTA (*takes a timid step towards Our Lady*): The Child is asleep.

SAINT FRANCIS: Lest you should be afraid to go near Him.

Bautista approaches slowly, timidly.

BERNARDA (*with artless adoration*): Will You let me give Him a kiss?

Our Lady bends her head in assent. Bernarda rises, comes to Her, falls on her knees beside the Child, and kisses His hand.

BAUTISTA (*enviously*): Well, you are a lucky devil! . . . a kiss!

SAINT FRANCIS (*pushing Bautista gently forward*): You go too.

BAUTISTA (*in great confusion, approaches, wipes his mouth on his sleeve, kisses the Child's hand . . . and at length understands! With glowing eyes he cries out*

exultantly): And my stepfather and Señor Simón told me that everything was a lie, that there was no Heaven, no Virgin, no Child Jesus; that they're nothing but spooks, spooks! (*Disdainfully*) Spooks! (*With sudden resolution*) You shall see for yourselves now if they're nothing but spooks.

BERNARDA: Where are you going?

BAUTISTA (*with the enthusiasm of an apostle*): To the pub. . . . to the laundries . . . up to the factory . . . to everywhere . . . to call them all . . . to make them come . . . that they may see that there really is a Virgin and Child, that it's all true! (*Calling*) Mother! . . . Uncle! . . . Seña Ubalda! . . . Señor Simón! . . . Everybody! . . . Come all of you! The Virgin is here! . . . She has appeared. . . . She has come to find us. . . . She has brought the Child! (*Goes out mad with excitement, shouting*) Mother! . . . Seña Ubalda! . . . Señor Simón! . . . the Virgin is here! . . . (*In the distance*) The Virgin is here!

Bernarda remains in an ecstasy, motionless, heedless of Bautista's cries. . . . She begins to speak, haltingly, as if it were not she who was speaking, but the spirit within her. Little by little her voice gains strength and she speaks in a state of mystic exaltation. As she begins a bright rosy light appears to descend from the sky and envelops the celestial gathering and the seer. Soft music is heard accompanying the verses, underlining and emphasizing the emotions of the speaker.

BERNARDA

(*Reciting*)

'Tis now Holy Night!
The song has told us.
All were singing it,
Not one understood it!

The Virgin was passing. . . .
Not a soul saw Her!
With the Child in Her arms. . . .
Not a soul knew it!

She knocked at the doors. . . .
Not one opened to Her!
The Child was crying. . . .
He was so cold!

—Mother, I'm cold,
For it is snowing,
And they will not answer,
Those I am seeking.
—Son, they are sleeping.
—Mother, they're sinning!

A voice was singing . . .
Afar we heard it. . . .
How clear it rang
In the cold, cold night!

'Tis now Holy Night!
The song has told us. . . .
All were listening. . . .
Not one understood it!

(*anxiously*)

Bernarda, Bernarda!
—What seek you, my dear?
—At thy door I am knocking,
And I shiver with cold! . . .

—Lord, I have neither
Firewood nor kindling.
—Light the fire
Of thy heart,
Its glow will suffice me. . . .
(*radiantly*)
All is for Thee, Lord!
And while waiting for Thee,
It has never been kindled.

The rosy light dies out; the scene is left in almost total darkness. Steps are heard and the confused, excited voices of an approaching crowd. Bautista is in the lead and is talking exultantly.

BAUTISTA: Course it's true, course it's true! By all the Saints! . . . Come along, all of you.

He enters, followed by a largish crowd of people. Prominent in the group are Seña Ubalda, a woman of fifty years, but aged by want and much suffering; her hair is quite white, but it is thick and curly; her face is pinched, her eyes are merry with drink; she carries a tin plate on which she thumps outrageously: Madalena, about thirty years old, of bold and provocative beauty, much painted, very overdressed in the tawdry manner of a street girl; she too shows signs of having been drinking: The Labourer, a vigorous, brutish man of forty: The Beggar, old, lame, one-armed, nearly blind, but very good tempered: The Ragamuffin, of uncertain age, very ragged, makes a living of a kind by collecting cigar ends, something of a wag: Nicasia, wife of The Labourer, lean, pale, and

anæmic, but, though very poorly clad, rather graceful: Señor Simón, a crafty publican, well dressed, wears a hat and cloak, speaks very deliberately. The rest of the crowd is made up of wretched-looking men and women: scavengers, washerwomen, beggars, etc.

SEÑA UBALDA (*singing in a husky voice*):

For joy and bliss
They shall not miss,
That make good cheer
This Holy Night.

SIMÓN: Be quiet, Seña Ubalda, what a beastly voice you have.

SEÑA UBALDA (*very pleased with herself*): Not for nuts! (*Singing*):

The shepherd upon a hill he sat,
He had on him his tabard and his hat,
His tar-box, his pipe and his flagat;
His name was . . .

BAUTISTA (*interrupting her*): Shut up! The Child is sleeping.

NICASIA: What a dark night!

MADALENA: And what a road! (*Stumbles*) Ow . . .!

THE RAGAMUFFIN: Cuddle up to me; we'll see you fall soft.

MADALENA: Get away with you, you mangy beast.

THE BEGGAR: How particular we are to-day!

SEÑA UBALDA (*to Bautista*): But where are you taking us to, you rascal?

BAUTISTA (*excitedly*): Here . . . here . . . Didn't I tell you? . . . Close to the bridge.

SIMÓN: All right, my boy . . . but why?

BAUTISTA (*uneasily, having discovered that the Virgin has disappeared*): To see the Virgin.

SIMÓN: And where is She?

SEÑA UBALDA: Yes . . . where is She?

SIMÓN: Well, I don't see Her.

SEÑA UBALDA: Nor I.

MADALENA: Nor do I.

BAUTISTA: Yes, yes, She is here. . . . She was here.

THE RAGAMUFFIN: Was!

MADALENA: You were dreaming.

BAUTISTA (*in anguish*): No . . . no. . . .

THE BEGGAR: Well, boy, this is a joke!

THE RAGAMUFFIN: A fat joke!

SEÑA UBALDA: You've got some gall to drag us from our warm corner and lead us such a dance on a night like this.

SIMÓN: You deserve a . . .

BAUTISTA (*in desperation*): It is true. . . . It is true. . . . She was here . . . with the Child . . . and the angels . . . and a friar . . . close to the pine tree.

MADALENA (*singing ironically*): "A pine tree's standing lonely."

BAUTISTA (*desperate*): Shut up, She'll hear you.

SIMÓN: Boy, you're drunk.

MADALENA. Mother of God! You have played us a trick, boy.

THE BEGGAR: Chuck him into the river to soak the booze out of him.

BAUTISTA (*sadly, but with faith*): She was here. . . . She was, but we do not see Her. . . . She is here. (*With the faith that moves mountains*) Lady! these people have come to seek You, because I told them to. . . . Lady! we are here.

A bright flash descends from the sky and the celestial party once more becomes visible. Bernarda is standing by Our Lady's side and holds in her hand one of St. Francis's roses.

BAUTISTA (*out of his mind with joy*): Aaa . . . h! Do you see? Look at Her . . . if you've eyes in your heads.

Confused, prolonged murmuring in the crowd. It was true! . . . it was true! the Virgin! . . . the Child! . . . It is true! *Fascinated by the apparition they advance a little, but draw back again overcome by a supernatural awe.*

SAINT FRANCIS: Come near.

THE CROWD (*stunned*): We?

SAINT FRANCIS: Our Lady is waiting for you.

THE CROWD (*dully*): Us?

SAINT FRANCIS: Jesus is calling you.

THE CROWD (*incredulous*): Us?

SAINT FRANCIS: The poor, the ignorant, the sinners, the unbelievers, the desperate, the hungry, the exploited, the oppressed. . . . Do you not hear His voice calling to you: "Come to me all you that labour, and are burdened, and I will refresh you"?

SEÑA UBALDA (*gloomily*): Labour? Like niggers! . . . burdened? Like asses! It's enough to have to live in this hell of a world, only longing for the hour to come for us to turn up our toes! I say if there is anyone . . . eh? my friend.

A dull murmur of assent from the crowd.

SAINT FRANCIS: Why then do you hold back any longer?

SEÑA UBALDA: You're right. Why should we wait? (*To the crowd*) Come along . . . the Lady has been kind enough to take a turn through the quarter.

The whole crowd surges round the Virgin and her companions. The women push to the front and get closest to Her, fascinated, curious, almost cheerful. The men take off their caps and range behind them more collectedly.

SIMÓN (*remains apart, but nevertheless takes off his hat; he scratches his head gently, thinking*): So there is a God! . . . seems there is. . . . Well, I'm glad!

SAINT FRANCIS (*putting his hand on his shoulder*): Don't you believe there is? Do not you know there is? Have they never told you?

SIMÓN: Scores of times.

SAINT FRANCIS: Well?

SIMÓN (*with many pauses, markedly Madrid in accent*): Look you . . . the truth. . . . One does not believe all you priests and friars say . . . for . . . pardon my saying it . . . as you draw profit from the success of your business, which is to make people believe; why!

of course one says . . . that is to say . . . it is clear one must have one's suspicions, but then one says to oneself: Man . . . in spite of everything it may be true, though they do say it!

SAINT FRANCIS (*gently reproachful*): Simón!

THE WOMEN (*to the Child*): Oh, you duck! Pretty one! What rosy cheeks!

SEÑA UBALDA: Can't someone sing a song to the Son of God the Father?

And one sings softly:

> Lullay, lullay, Thou little tiny Child,
> By-by, lullay, lullay,
> By-by, lullay, lullay.

SIMÓN: For look you . . . one would be glad if it were so . . . for in having God we should at least have . . . well, at least Purgatory . . . and though, say for putting cats into a rabbit pie, or for watering wine, if one thinks about it one sees that one has earned some dose of hell fire; yet one consoles oneself by thinking that others are having a turn on the gridiron who deserve it more.

SAINT FRANCIS (*reproachfully*): Simón!

SIMÓN: And first of all take justice. One sets small store on it, for one has got used to finding that on earth no one gets it. That's the truth! . . . No one likes to be the only one to get it in the neck; but if it were really to be for all alike, how much better it would be! And the punishment could fit the crime.

(*With conviction*) I'm glad there's a God. I'm glad, I'm glad!

The women round the Virgin, some standing, others huddled on the ground, others on their knees, marvel at the Child and pay court to Him.

SEÑA UBALDA: Look at His little mouth.

NICASIA: He is laughing.

SEÑA UBALDA: I think He is going to speak.

MADALENA: Blessed is the hour when Thou wast born!

NICASIA: And the Mother who bore Thee!

SEÑA UBALDA: And the paps that gave Thee suck!

NICASIA: Oh! He's going to sleep again.

THE LABOURER (*roughly, rather shy*): Get out of the way, women. What nuisances you are.

SIMÓN: He's right. . . . You are all the same. . . . you've no consideration for anyone. . . . Be off!

NICASIA: As usual you want the men to have first place. No, my man, not this time! Here we are neither men nor women, but just children of God.

SEÑA UBALDA (*emphatically*): You make me tired!

BERNARDA (*humbly to the Virgin*): We're not giving any trouble, are we?

SEÑA UBALDA: God reward You for your kindly thought in remembering the poor.

BAUTISTA (*very decidedly*): What You ought to do is to stay with us for always.

ALL (*enthusiastically*): That's it! That's it! Stay here, Lady, stay with us!

SEÑA UBALDA: For we love You and your Son better than the rich do, if it comes to that.

THE LABOURER (*breaking in shyly and awkwardly*): Yes, Lady . . . and with less hope of gain . . . though perhaps I shouldn't say it . . . but first and last You have given everything on earth to them . . . and we . . . begging your pardon . . . have little to thank You for.

NICASIA (*frightened*): Keep quiet! She'll be vexed.

THE LABOURER: Oh, I'll keep quiet.

BERNARDA: Oh! Light of Heaven! I wonder, might one take You in one's arms!

SEÑA UBALDA: Let me have Him, Lady, do! just for a moment, not more.

NICASIA: No, me!

BERNARDA: Me!

MADALENA (*with loving eagerness*): Me, Lady, me! (*Holds out her arms passionately.*)

SEÑA UBALDA: What's come over you, you slut? who have more sins in your body than hairs on your head.

Madalena retires, covered with shame, and throws herself on her knees, burying her face in her hands.

THE RAGAMUFFIN (*to Seña Ubalda*): No, what's wrong with you is that you haven't got over the liquor you've swilled to-night.

SEÑA UBALDA (*very decidedly*): But it's Holy Night.

THE RAGAMUFFIN: For you every day is a Feast Day.

THE LABOURER (*confidentially to Our Lady*): Lady . . .

a greater drunkard was never born of woman. . . . Why she'll even drink the lye in the bucking tub.

THE RAGAMUFFIN: And many a night sleeps in the chink.

SEÑA UBALDA (*with passionate emphasis*): But I sleep . . . and if I did not drink I should not sleep. (*With tragic concern to the Virgin*) What's there for me to do but drink, Lady? My man was like this fellow, (*takes hold of The Labourer's arm and drags him to Our Lady's feet*) and he got killed in the machinery . . . and they didn't give me a copper; because they said it was his own fault . . . as if they meant he killed himself for pleasure! . . . And I had seven children, whom I loved as You do yours, Lady; and four died in infancy of hunger, Lady, of hunger! (*Passionately striking her breasts*) What could they get from here? What could I give them? when every day bread cost more, and coal cost more, and the hovel we lived in cost more, and never a decent meal could I get. . . . And of the three who were left me to grow up, two lads and one girl . . . would that they had died as babes, like the others! The youngest, a good son to me, they took to serve the King, and the Moors killed him. (*Bitterly*) What good did it do the King that the Moors killed my boy? And what good would it have done him if he had killed some Moor? who had a mother just as he had, and the same wish to live. (*Breathlessly*) And the eldest got hard labour . . . for stabbing the young gentleman who dishonoured his sister . . . and she . . . she walks

the streets like that wench yonder. (*She takes Madalena, who is kneeling on the edge of the crowd, by the arm and pulls her towards the Virgin, at whose feet she falls. With the harsh voice of delirium*) What can I do but drink, Lady? for if I don't drink and night comes, (*haunted she pushes back with her hands the ghosts which she thinks she sees before her*) I see them all, with gaping mouths, with staring eyes . . . begging for bread . . . calling "mother" . . . plucking at my skirts, (*closes her eyes and falls back raving*) and I don't want to see them! I don't want to see them! I don't want to see them!

Some men and women take hold of Seña Ubalda and tend her.

SIMÓN (*with affectionate roughness*): Come! Seña Ubalda, don't carry on so.

THE LABOURER (*shyly*): She's right, she's right. (*To the Virgin*) Things get worse every day, Lady. . . . One works the skin off one's fingers . . . and nothing for it!

NICASIA: And they say there's more money in the world every day.

THE RAGAMUFFIN: And that they're always finding new things to make the fields grow more and the crops better.

SEÑA UBALDA (*thickly, wiping her eyes and coming close again*): And machines to make bread quicker.

THE LABOURER: And to get coal from the mines easier.

NICASIA: And to turn out cloth more cheaply.

THE RAGAMUFFIN: And look what we have to wear, (*pointing to the rags which show his skin through the holes*) suit of broadcloth with bare skin facings, eh, what?

THE BEGGAR: And I've not had a hot meal these four nights. . . . I don't say dine, for for some time I've made it a habit to sleep by day, so as not to know when it's midday, which they say is the proper time to take off the stew pot.

NICASIA: That was once. . . . To-day to eat garlic soup one must be rich.

THE BEGGAR: Rich! (*Drawling*) They say a millionaire has committed suicide because he had set up a factory to make goloshes, and made so many that no one in the world would buy them, so he had nothing to do but shoot himself.

THE RAGAMUFFIN: Blime! Where's this blinking footwear to be found? (*points to his feet shod with the raggedest of hempen sandals.*)

SEÑA UBALDA: The Trusts will have kept hold of them to see if a shortage will raise the price.

THE BEGGAR: Don't worry! It's only a question of time, children. If the corns on the soles of one's feet get big enough, sole-leather isn't needed. The devil take them!

NICASIA: We laugh at everything, so as not to cry, Lady; but what each has to suffer, no one knows but herself.

SIMÓN: Look here, my friends, aren't you nuts, as they say! On the day the Lady comes to visit you,

nothing occurs to you but to tell Her your troubles . . . a fine way to make Her relish the thought of coming this way again.

SEÑA UBALDA: We tell Her our troubles because She has the face of a saint; but we haven't asked for anything, as you know yourself.

THE RAGAMUFFIN: Which won't stop Her if She has the mind to give something.

MADALENA (*sobbing painfully, taking hold of Our Lady's robe*): Pity, Lord! Mercy, Lord!

SIMÓN (*looking at Madalena, who is stretched on the ground at Our Lady's feet*): Oh, you! . . . It's always the most abandoned who is the boldest. Get away! You are defiling the Lady's robe.

MADALENA: I know well enough that my mere look defiles. But do not send me away. . . . Pity, Lord! Mercy, Lord! (*Twisting her body round and striking her breast*) I am the sink of the world. . . . I carry the poison of all the sins. . . . I am the barren fig tree. . . . I am the bitter fruit. . . . I am the bread made of ashes and tears. (*Shrieking*) I do not ask pardon. . . . I ask a penance: (*raving*) that every thorn on the road pierce my bare feet . . . that I be cast off of men . . . that they stone me . . . that they drag me along the ground, that they trample on me, that they rend me in pieces! . . . Penance, Lord! Penance, Lord! Fire to consume the leprosy of this flesh!

She falls face down on the ground, sobbing bitterly.

SIMÓN: You've got the hysterics with a vengeance.

BERNARDA (*rather bashfully to the Virgin*): It's Madalena . . . a girl of the streets, Lady.

BAUTISTA (*with emphasis*): But she has a good heart, and has treated me at the coffee stalls no end of times.

MADALENA (*tearing out her hair*): Penance, Lord! Penance, Lord! (*Very miserable, despairingly*) Where is there a hole in which to hide myself? . . . Where is there a dungeon in which to immure myself? . . . Where is there a desert in which to bury myself, where no one can ever see me?

SEÑA UBALDA: You don't half boast, woman! You seem to think that no one's ever sinned in the world before.

MADALENA (*dully*): I am more miserable than anyone ever was before.

SEÑA UBALDA: Get that out of your head. Each one of us has her trouble, for we are all of flesh and blood . . . but we can't read and write and don't know how to say to the Lady in fine language; Lady, I am a street walker. We hold our tongues, you spout; but it's not all from a pain in your heart. . . . If a body's really ashamed, she carries her shame even in repentance; if she has been used to give scandal, she goes on giving scandal even in the confessional. . . . (*To the others*) Am I not right?

THE LABOURER (*somewhat perplexed*): It's clear . . . each one has his bit. . . .

SEÑA UBALDA: The real fact is that when hunger hurts

past bearing, she does not take a tight enough grip on herself to keep in the right way.

THE LABOURER *and*

THE RAGAMUFFIN: Hear, hear!

MADALENA (*in a stifled voice*): I never sinned through hunger! I sinned because I yearned to love and be loved. No one has ever loved me. (*Turning to the Virgin*) I had no father, Lady, nor mother either; for she abandoned me, left me at some street corner. I do not know what trouble made her leave me. . . . Before I could talk I longed for her kiss. Till I was fifteen no one ever kissed me.

THE RAGAMUFFIN: Blime, but you've got quits since, my girl!

MADALENA (*bitterly*): Since! . . . since! (*Desperately*) No one has ever loved me, Lady, (*fiercely*) and I have never loved a soul.

BAUTISTA: The Child has woken up. . . . He is looking at you.

BERNARDA: Come near. You remember what the gentleman here said (*referring to St. Francis*) that He is seeking us all, and loves us all.

MADALENA (*turning to look at the Child, humbly, lovingly*): Art Thou looking at me, Lord? What dost Thou want to say to me with those sad eyes? That I do not understand Thee?

BAUTISTA: He is not sad, He is laughing. . . .

BERNARDA: Kiss His hand, He won't be angry.

MADALENA: No, no! Wretched woman that I am.

(*Drags herself back without getting up, and talks to the Child from a little distance*) Too late have I found Thee, Fount of pure Love, too late! For the lamp is quenched and no light brightens the hearth. (*Desolately*) I do not want to look at Thee with these eyes; I cannot raise these arms to Thee; I cannot name Thee with this mouth.

She throws herself backwards and falls into the arms of the other women, who support her. The voice of The Priest is heard at the back, calling out.

THE PRIEST: Where are They? Where are They? (*He enters. He is a man in the fifties; he wears a cassock and ferriola, brown with age, frayed, almost in tatters; large boots, evidently not made for him, very shabby, the soles worn through and the heels down. On his head nothing but the calotte. His grey hair is shaggy and unkempt. He has neither collar nor cuffs. Two buttons of his cassock are wanting. His wasted face is of great nobility and manly beauty. His gleaming eyes are those of a mystic; at times of extraordinary gentleness, at others blazing with the fire of a devotee. The love which consumes him as a furnace is ecstatic when he speaks to the Child or the Mother, bluff and fraternal when he addresses the poor.*) Where are They? (*His eyes seek Them with expectancy and yearning.*) I saw the brightness which illumined the night, and I trembled with joy. (*Sees the Mother and Child.*) O Beauty, ever ancient, ever new! At length do my dull eyes behold Thee! (*He draws his hands violently across his eyes, as if to tear*

away the last film of materiality which clouds them. On his entrance the crowd has drawn apart to give him passage. Only Bernarda and Bautista remain near Our Lady; in the middle of the scene Madalena lies stretched on the ground. The Priest approaches Our Lady gravely, lovingly, with the smile of a friend meeting friend, his trembling hands raised in the attitude of a priest at the altar, asking grace from on high before turning to bless the people.) Creator of the world, Ruler of the world, Redeemer of the world. . . . Thou who so many times hast deigned to come down from heaven to these hands, suffer, I pray Thee, that these same hands caress Thy baby head!

While speaking he has drawn near, and at the last words falls at Our Lady's feet, gazing at the Child in a rapture, oblivious to his surroundings. His hands are stretched out as if to caress the Child's face, but he does not actually touch Him.

BERNARDA (*confidentially to the Virgin, and talking in her ear*): It is Don Manuel . . . the mad priest. . . .

BAUTISTA (*also confidentially to the Virgin*): The fact is, he's not really a priest; he doesn't say Mass . . .

BERNARDA: Because they won't let him . . . but he gives all he has to the poor.

BAUTISTA (*without raising his voice out of respect for The Priest, who is rapt in contemplation*): When he was a proper priest he was always about the public laundries and the lime kilns, and at night round the doors of the taverns, and he used to preach in the streets,

saying that God was calling, but that no one heard Him.

BERNARDA: And here, at the end of the bridge, he built a large shed of old planks as a shelter for women of the streets and that sort.

BAUTISTA: And he used to go and beg at the cook shops to get something for them to eat.

BERNARDA: And they were all mad about him. . . .

BAUTISTA: And one of them, a terribly bad lot, met him one day at the door of the church when he was walking with the Bishop, and went up and gave him a kiss.

BERNARDA: And they took away his licence. . . .

BAUTISTA: She means to say that they cleared his platter clean.

THE PRIEST (*talking to the Child with loving intimacy*): I sought Thee to-night in the shrine. . . . Thou wast not there. . . . I sought Thee the length and breadth of the city, which is full of the sound of Thy name . . . and Thou wast not there either. . . . And now I find Thee, King of Peace, with the poor and the hungry and the destitute . . . with these sheep without a shepherd! . . . O Heart athirst for Love! pardon this Thy foolish servant, who has been so witless as to go in search of Thee, unmindful that on this night Thy love could not let Thee forget the cold stable, the poor manger, the handful of straw, in which Thou didst come into the world. (*Rising and addressing the others with fiery emotion*) And you? What are you doing that

you are not leaping for joy? For what season are you hoarding your rejoicing? Our Lord has come Himself to you, has shown Himself to you, so that seeing Him you could not but believe in Him, to make up for the dulness of us who have not known how to teach you His name! Are you dumb? . . . Are you blind? . . . Do not you feel in your hearts a new hope, a wonderful fire?

THE RAGAMUFFIN (*troubled*): Blime, if it ain't true, guv'ner! I'm standing in the snow, and it's freezing cruel, and my breath's all stiff . . . and I'm not cold.

THE PRIEST: It is a night of portents. Rejoice! Let not this miracle have been wrought in vain. Do not consent that the Mother and Child, after having been with you, should depart and leave you lonely. . . . Draw near. . . . Gird yourselves against those who would rob you of Them. Keep Them here!

MADALENA (*uneasily*): They are coming. . . . They are coming.

BAUTISTA (*much alarmed*): Who's coming?

MADALENA: I don't know . . . but they are close. . . . I hear their footsteps. . . . There they are!

Some people in a state of great confusion appear at the back. They are the old Sacristan who passed through the church in the first scene, another sacristan, his young assistant, and some of the acolytes who had been serving at Midnight Mass. They carry lanterns. They are wearing their cassocks and cottas, but have hurriedly thrown over them overcoats or capes or

plaids, and they are shivering with the cold of the night. . . . They stop at the back surprised and startled by the crowd, but although they are facing the Mother and Child, they do not see Them.

SEÑA UBALDA: They've stopped . . . seems they are afraid.

THE PRIEST: Who goes there?

THE SACRISTAN (*without moving from where he is, trembling*): Friends! . . . peaceful folk.

SAINT FRANCIS (*coming forward*): For whom are you looking?

THE SACRISTAN (*coming up to St. Francis in great agitation*): Well, we are looking for . . . no offence meant . . . the Most Holy Virgin of Bethlehem . . . an image which is worth a fortune . . . no offence meant . . . Reverend Father . . . very old . . . most marvellous . . . a work of the seventeenth century . . . for which an American museum offered I don't know how many millions of dollars . . . no offence meant . . . and your Reverence must know it . . . the one at the High Altar in the Cathedral . . . Reverend Father . . . that is to say it was . . . for I don't know how to say it . . . for . . . to-night it has disappeared!

SAINT FRANCIS (*smiling*): And why do you seek it here?

THE SACRISTAN (*looking round him fearfully; confidentially to St. Francis*): Ah! . . . Reverend Father . . . because . . . no offence meant . . . everything that

is lost in a suspicious manner finds its way some time or other to these districts. . . . Your Reverence will surely understand me. . . .

THE LABOURER (*coming up to him threateningly*): That's as much as to say that you think we've stolen it.

THE SACRISTAN (*thoroughly frightened*): Oh, no! Oh, no! . . . No! I don't think anything . . . no offence meant . . . but, for the love of God . . . (*addressing the crowd which looks at him with a curiosity part hostile, part amused*) if you have seen it . . . if you have any idea where it can be . . . tell me . . . have the charity to tell me. . . . I will give a handsome reward . . . . no questions asked . . . for if it is not found, I am lost, Reverend Father . . . no offence meant . . . I am lost!

SAINT FRANCIS (*smiling*): Lost? Why?

THE SACRISTAN (*humbly*): Because your servant is to blame . . . yes, Reverend Father . . . your servant is entrusted with the last inspection of the church . . . and to-night . . . I confess, Reverend Father . . . seeing what night it is . . . I did partake a little too freely of the juice of the grape . . . and . . . I left open the side door of the second nave. . . . By it the thieves must have got in. . . . No knowing but some may have hidden themselves in the confessionals after Midnight Mass. These people have no respect for anything! . . . I am lost, Reverend Father. . . . If it is not found before morning, I am lost! . . . And it had on all the jewels!

At this moment the acolytes, more innocent than

The Sacristan, see the Virgin and break out in cries of joy.

ACOLYTES (*joyfully*): There She is! There She is! Señor Nepomuceno, She's here!

THE SACRISTAN (*bewildered, seeing nothing*): Where? . . . Where?

SAINT FRANCIS (*taking The Sacristan kindly by the arm and leading him up to Our Lady*): There! before your eyes, you blind man. Do you not see Her? Have you lived so many years close to Her and yet do not know Her?

THE SACRISTAN (*marvelling first . . . then scandalized*): Lady! . . . You here? . . . In this quarter? . . . (*With supreme contempt*) Among these people?

THE LABOURER (*coming up close to him menacingly*): Look here! We people are as much the children of God as you are . . . may be more!

THE SACRISTAN (*frightened out of his wits*): I beg your pardon. . . . I did not mean to give umbrage . . . my lord. . . .

THE LABOURER (*sullenly, but pleased that he has frightened The Sacristan*): I'm no lord, and don't want to be one; but I have a pair of fists which were not made to kill flies with.

THE SACRISTAN (*terrified, seizing hold of St. Francis's habit*): Oh! Reverend Father!

SAINT FRANCIS (*gently*): Peace! . . . Peace! (*To The Labourer*) Do not with your anger dim the glory of the miracle which God has wrought for you. (*To The*

Sacristan, somewhat more sharply) And you . . . learn to respect this miracle of love which is past your understanding.

THE SACRISTAN (*by no means assured yet*): But it is . . .

SAINT FRANCIS (*with serene dignity*): Our Lady has come to this quarter of her own will. Nobody has stolen her image from the shrine. . . . Perhaps in the offerings at your altar there was lacking that one which the Child covets most.

THE SACRISTAN (*offended*): But the Cathedral was ablaze with gold! And your Reverence has no idea what the incense has cost this year. They say that owing to the war no ships have been able to come from the East, and it's a scandal the way the price has gone up.

SAINT FRANCIS (*pityingly*): Gold! . . . Frankincense! I thought so! . . . What was wanting was the Myrrh!

THE SACRISTAN (*without understanding*): The Myrrh?

SAINT FRANCIS (*kindly*): Yes, my son, yes . . . the myrrh. Myrrh is bitter, . . . myrrh is hunger and cold . . . is helplessness and desolation . . . is poverty and ignorance . . . The bitterness of the world (*pointing to the crowd*) is here. . . . This is the offering of which the Mother and Child received least. It is to find this that They have come trudging through the snow.

THE SACRISTAN (*getting back to his own concern*): But if They do not return, what will become of me? (*With familiar respect to the Virgin*) Lady . . . Come back to your shrine. . . . To-day is Christmas . . . there will be solemn High Mass . . . special music . . . every-

thing is ready . . . the candles . . . the flowers . . . What will your faithful say if they do not find You? (*Our Lady makes no sign*) Think, Lady! . . . the best people in the town will be there. (*Firmly convinced of the strength of his argument*) Admission by ticket only . . . and what music, Lady, what music! . . . and the sermon! . . . Twenty duros it will cost . . . and the singers five hundred pesetas! (*Our Lady remains unmoved*) And they have got the best tapestries from the palace to hang over the doors . . . and the central heating will be inaugurated . . . and the electric organ! For the Warden does not want people to say that the guardians of tradition are enemies of progress. . . . (*a little put out that his tale of the splendours in store do not move Our Lady*) Come! . . . Lady!! . . . (*Kneels*) Let me plead for this your humble sacristan. Consider that if You do not return, I am lost, Lady. (*With emotion*) They will think that I am an accomplice . . . that I have stolen You. . . . Come back, my Queen and Lady! . . . Come back, Lady!

The Virgin rises to her feet. There is a movement of profound expectancy in the crowd and a dull murmuring.

SOME: She is getting up.

OTHERS: She is going away.

OTHERS: She is deserting us.

THE PRIEST (*excitedly*): Call to Her, plead with Her! Do not let them take Her away from you.

SEÑA UBALDA: The rich will have told them to come to find Her.

THE BEGGAR: Yes, those who have given the money to build the churches.

THE PRIEST (*anxiously*): No matter! Call to Her. . . . Implore Her . . . Lady . . . our Mother, leave us not orphaned . . . Son of God, do not forsake us! . . . We are nothing, we have nothing. Our poverty pleads for us.

SEÑA UBALDA (*to Madalena, who is still on her knees*): You say something, my girl, you who can talk so fine.

MADALENA (*sobbing*): From the pit of our sins we call to Thee.

BERNARDA: And to-day, when we love You so much! How can You leave us?

THE PRIEST: Call to Him! Plead with Him! . . . Son of God, by Thy poverty, by Thine ignominy, by the insult of Thy sceptre of reeds, by the infamy of Thy death between the two thieves! . . . Here are the leprous, the blind, the crippled . . . the little dogs that wait for the crumbs which fall from Thy table.

Our Lady comes forward a step.

THE LABOURER (*churlishly*): Don't worry yourselves any more. . . . They won't think such a deal of us, if we have nothing to offer Them.

THE PRIEST: Leave us not, Lord!

SEÑA UBALDA (*meekly to the Virgin*): Go, Lady, go! For You have your own house, and it's bitter cold here for the Child.

THE LABOURER: We thank You kindly for coming, even if You have only dropped in in passing.

THE RAGAMUFFIN (*bashfully*): We appreciate your favour . . . and shan't forget it.

NICASIA (*wiping her eyes with her apron, sadly, and a little angrily*): It would have been better for us not to have known you at all.

THE SACRISTAN (*taking Our Lady's robe by the hem as if it were the cope of the Celebrant*): Come, Lady, let us go. (*Scornfully to the crowd*) Make way there!

THE PRIEST (*throwing himself on the ground before Our Lady*): No, no, no! (*To the crowd*) On your knees, all of you! . . . Plead with me. (*The whole crowd kneels. Our Lady takes a step towards them*) You are not going, Lady? You are not leaving us, Lady? Wretched am I who know not how, and am not worthy to detain You.

SAINT FRANCIS (*bending towards the Priest and placing his hand on his shoulder*): Dost thou doubt also? O thou of little faith.

THE CROWD (*with hands outstretched towards Our Lady*): Lady, do not forget us. Come back here to us some day. Do not let us forget the Child.

The Virgin approaches the kneeling crowd, holding up the Child in her two hands, and lowers Him very slowly over the people. Seña Ubalda takes hold of Him with a cry of joy and immediately gets up. All rise behind her wild with happiness.

THE VIRGIN (*yielding the Child to them*): Take Him. . . . He is yours.

SEÑA UBALDA: She has said He is yours. . . . He is ours! . . . the Child is ours . . . do you hear? . . . He is ours!

ALL (*surging round Seña Ubalda, jubilant, proud, amazed, a little fearful*): He is ours! He is ours!

Our Lady, smiling and happy, draws to one side with her escort of angels and St. Francis.

THE PRIEST (*joining the crowd in an ecstasy of joy*): Yes! He is yours. He is your Christ. Raise Him on high. Enter with Him into the city, that all men may see Him in your hands. He is your Christ; He is your Standard! Raise it, salute it, defend it! Never consent that those who oppress you, who exploit you, who deny you the bread of the body and the bread of the soul, take it from you, to make it theirs, to be raised against you. Christ was born for you. His poverty is your treasury, His law your justice. Christ is yours, is yours! Ask of Him, take counsel of Him. Let not those who have taken the earth from you, lock also the gate of heaven to you.

THE CROWD (*moving away, surrounding the woman who is carrying the Child*): Christ is ours! . . . Christ was born for us! . . . He is ours!

THE SACRISTAN (*appalled*): What have you done, Lady? They are taking Him away . . . we are left without Him. . . . You come back, Lady! You come back at any rate . . . the Child . . . we shall have to

manage . . . we can take his from St. Joseph or St. Anthony . . . but You will come back, Lady, will not you?

SAINT FRANCIS (*pushing The Sacristan away from Our Lady*): Incurably blind! . . . Wooden head! Go back to the town . . . set all the bells a-ringing . . . open wide all the doors of the church, and let enter who will. . . . Whosoever shall sincerely come to seek the Child and His Mother shall surely find Them.

He pushes The Sacristan gently away and motions him to leave the spot. The Sacristan goes off, looking back at every step, not very sure, in spite of all that he has seen, that the prodigy promised him will be realized. The acolytes, boy-like attracted to any noise, have gone off with the crowd which is bearing away the Child. Our Lady again takes her seat on her humble throne of stones, surrounded by the angels. St. Francis kneels at her feet, and they talk together serenely and familiarly. During the celestial conversation music is again heard; it continues till the fall of the curtain.

THE VIRGIN

Francis . . .

SAINT FRANCIS

Yes, Lady . . .

THE VIRGIN

They have taken the Child!

SAINT FRANCIS

You have left Him with them; does it grieve You, my Lady?

THE VIRGIN

'Tis His own doing, how then can it sadden me?
He this night was dreaming, asleep in my arms;
In His dream He spoke to me;—It is now Holy Night;
Where do my shepherds stay? Is it they have failed me?
They have lost their way . . . . Come quick for we must find them.
—Dark is the night, my Child!—A star's ray will lighten us.
—I fear me of the road!—Then we'll sing as we're journeying.
—But if they are asleep?—Then a stone I will throw at them,
'Twill strike them to the heart, and sore will they be wounded,
With the wound of love, which only love can lessen.
If I give the hurt, Mother, I have means to heal it.

A pause . . . There is heard the bell in a convent tower ringing for Lauds. Two o'clock strikes.

THE VIRGIN

Francis!

SAINT FRANCIS

Yes, Lady . . .

THE VIRGIN

For Lauds they are ringing . . .
Shall we say them together?

SAINT FRANCIS

Oh! Lady, with You!

THE VIRGIN

To the misguided, to the persecuted,
To those who are in misery or pain,
To those on land who from their path are straying,
To those storm-driven on the trackless main,
To those who are despisèd, to the sinners,
To those on watch and praying for the light,
God send a vision of Himself resplendent,
A vision of His peace this Holy Night!

While the Virgin is speaking these lines
the curtain slowly falls.

THE END

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